

OVERLAND | JOURNAL



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Shway-shway on the Sinai Trail

Two wheel swip-swap for two feet and a camel.

By Lois Pryce





A proactive approach to collecting firewood. **Opening spread:** No map required. Musallem sends the cam-eleers ahead to set up camp.

Out of the companionable silence, the same refrain occasionally drifted across the sands, “Now *this* trail would be fun on a dirt bike.” It was inevitable, I suppose, when you drop five seasoned adventure motorcyclists into one of the world’s most stunning deserts—with no bikes.

It was something of an experiment. My husband, Austin, and I, along with three friends, were spending the Christmas holiday trekking across Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula, the jagged tooth of mountainous desert that links Africa and Asia.

Austin is, of course, well-known for his round-the-world motorcycle trips and films, and I’ve also clocked up a few continents on two wheels. The friends accompanying us on this journey had pretty much covered the globe on their bikes: Suzi spent three years riding her Honda Transalp around the world; Joe had ridden across Europe, Russia, and the Sahara with Austin; and Robin is a compulsive desert rider with multiple Saharan expeditions to his name. Although all of us are familiar with desert travel and no strangers to life on the road, it is fair to say that none of us could be described as keen hikers. But there comes a time in every middle-aged adventure rider’s life when a bit of exercise doesn’t go amiss.

The idea to swap our wheels for our feet came about after Austin was hired for a filming assignment in the Sinai a year before, documenting a British adventurer who was walking with Bedouin tribesmen across the peninsula on the recently created Sinai Trail, Egypt’s first long-distance hiking route. Despite a loathing of physical exercise, a total lack of preparation, and what turned into a fortnight of excruciating foot blisters, Austin returned from the trek raving about the experience. He had become fast friends with the Bedouin guide and founder of the trail, Musallem Faraj Tarabin, who had offered to lead us on a walk through the desert and mountains. “It’ll be the ideal Christmas detox fitness project!” Austin proclaimed.

Nobody wants to hear the words Christmas and detox in the same sentence, but we eventually came up with a plan to suit. We would walk a 150-mile section of the Sinai Trail and finish our trek in time for New Year’s Eve, which would be spent in the Red Sea diving mecca of Dahab—a place renowned not just for its coral reefs, but also as a hippie hangout and party town. Here we could compensate for the deprivation of our expedition and put paid to any health benefits of the trek.

But blistered feet and a dry Christmas were just a few of the considerations. The Sinai Peninsula has been the target of several terrorist attacks in the last decade with bombs and stabbings directed at tourist resorts, including the famously peace-loving Dahab. But it was the 2015 mid-air bombing of a Russian airliner as it took off from Sharm el-Sheikh airport that saw Sinai fully erased from the tourist trail. The peninsula had been subject to UK government travel warnings since the Arab Spring and Egypt’s revolution of 2011, but it was this audacious assault that finally saw it coloured no-go red on the UK Foreign Office map. All British airlines were ordered by the government to cancel their direct flights to Sharm el-Sheikh, plunging the local tourism industry into

sharp decline. What was once a top beach holiday destination for divers and winter sunseekers dwindled to a desperate shell of its former self with the otherwise beautiful Red Sea coast now lined with dilapidated and abandoned hotels. Even if we had tried to bring our bikes here overland, we wouldn’t have gotten very far. The Sinai’s entire road system is locked down with military checkpoints, barriers, and vehicle searches conducted by squads of paranoid policemen.

Just a few weeks before our departure, Sinai suffered yet another bomb attack. Despite this, we were determined to continue with our plan. The five of us knew from our collective world travels that government warnings and newspaper headlines are far removed from the reality of life on the ground, and the likelihood of being the victim of a terror attack is very low. But most significantly, we knew we would be in safe hands during our trek. In keeping with the age-old custom for travellers in Sinai, we would be walking with the Bedouin. Our guide and man of the mountains, Musallem, knew every twist and turn of the desert, all the best spots—and no doubt, the ones to avoid too.

A small local plane out of Cairo delivered us from the sprawling glow of the capital into Sinai’s inky desert night, and we were soon bundled into a local taxi, making our way up the coast to Musallem’s beach camp near the small port of Nuweiba. Entering a softly-lit tent, we found our host and his friends lounging barefoot on floor cushions around a woven, patterned carpet. Dressed in the traditional ankle-length *jal-abiyas*, heads swathed in their *shemagh*, the traditional checkered Arab scarf, there was no doubt we were deep in Bedouin country now. Musallem—small, wiry, smiley, and bursting with energy—hugged Austin like an old friend and welcomed us, the weary travellers, with glasses of sweet black tea.

“Life is good,” Musallem declared with an expansive, nicotine-stained smile, as we kicked off our shoes and lowered ourselves onto the cushions, tuning into the sounds of Arabic chatter, bubbling *shisha* pipes, and the gentle lapping of the waves. Across the Gulf of Aqaba, in the blackness, the lights of Saudi Arabia twinkled with all the lure of a forbidden land. But tomorrow we would be turning away from the ocean and heading west into the arid *wadis* (valleys) and *jebels* (mountains or hills) of the desert. Already, the pre-Christmas fever of London and even the noise and bustle of Cairo seemed a world away.

The Bedouin, like the Sinai itself, stand apart from the rest of Egypt. They do not consider themselves to be Egyptians but rather belonging to a wider nomadic group that are to be found throughout North Africa and the Middle East. Long neglected and often discriminated against by the Egyptian authorities, the various Bedouin tribes of the Sinai lived a wilderness existence for centuries, travelling between their fishing camps on the coast and the mountains of the interior, where they tended gardens in the summer months. In the 1980s an exodus of mainland Egyptians poured into Sinai,

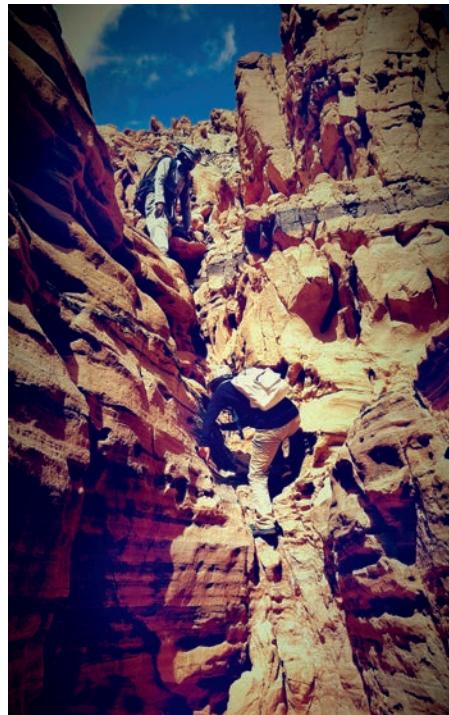
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partly encouraged by the Egyptian government, to stake a claim on the peninsula which had only just been clawed back from the Israeli occupation following the Six-Day War. The booming tourist industry of the 1990s saw yet more population growth, but the relationship between the incoming Egyptians and the Bedouin was not always comfortable. The fishing camps became towns, and eventually glitzy resorts. And the Bedouin, under government pressure, were forced to lead more settled lives in this new world that had sprung up around them. Some of them adapted and formed tourism-related businesses: beach camps, hotels, and tour companies, while still maintaining some Bedouin traditions in their dress and lifestyle. But others, particularly the younger generation, began to abandon the tribal ways. It was this that motivated Musallem to create the Sinai Trail, bringing together a number of different Bedouin tribes to work together on the project. No mean feat, apparently.

"This has been a big success," Musallem explained the next morning, as we clambered into the back of the beat-up Jeep that would transport us to the start of our walk. "It was my dream to bring together all the tribes of the Sinai: Tarabin, Muzeina, Jebeleya and five others. So now we have a different guide from each tribe leading the group through their region, and this way, every tribe benefits from people walking the trail."

Vast wadis provide perfect walking conditions for both camels and humans. **Opposite, left to right:** The most important task of the day—getting the tea going. As Louis Armstrong said, "When you're smiling...the whole world smiles with you." Sometimes the route was vertical.



Calm, charismatic, with a twinkle in his eye, and a deep connection to the land, it was easy to see how Musallem was the man to smooth over tribal differences. But his main source of pride was the mobilization of the younger generation.

“The trail is now so popular we have many boys wanting to be involved, to learn how to look after the camels, and about their land. This is the most important thing to me, for the Bedouin boys to learn of their culture, and to train them as guides for the future. If we do not pass it on, it will be forgotten—the knowledge of the mountains, the plants, the nature, the stories. This is not written anywhere.”

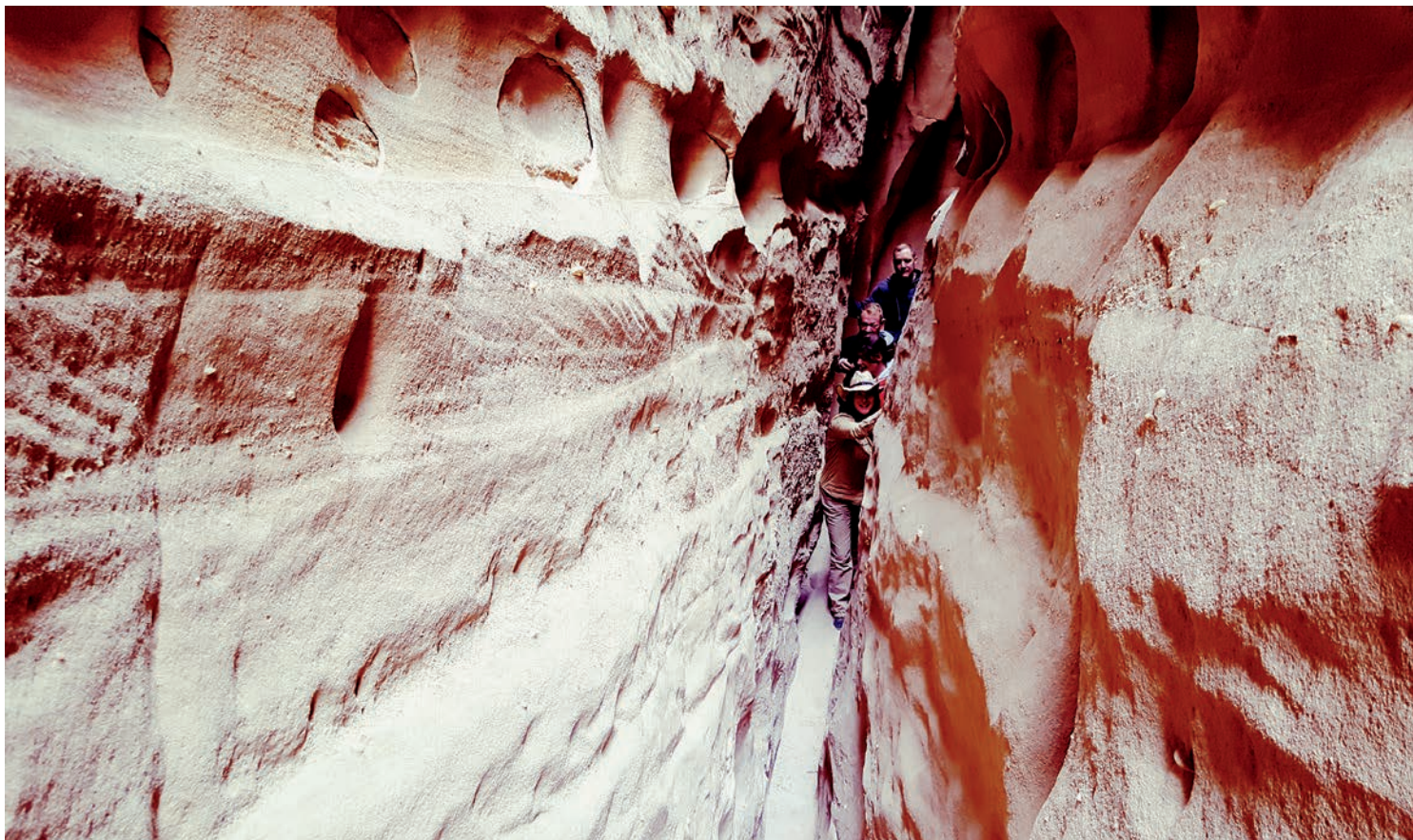
The Bedouin, their land, and their oral tradition are inextricably linked to their long history as guides. They have been leading strangers across the Sinai for centuries; from the ancient pilgrims making their way to Mount Sinai and Saint Catherine’s Monastery, to traders from the Middle East, and later, explorers from Europe. The Sinai Trail is just the latest incarnation of the Bedouin at work, doing what they do best. But if you show up expecting a hiking trail in the familiar sense, don’t be surprised at the absence of neatly carved wooden signposts, mile-markers, or route maps. All the info is in the heads of the mountain men.

A short bumpy Jeep ride to the mouth of a canyon and the head of the trail revealed a thrilling sight: two young, robed cameleers, Khalid and Mohammed, loading their ships of

the desert with our supplies for the next week. Here were our beasts of burden, four dromedaries, kneeling obediently in the sand, while an incomprehensible amount of equipment, food, and water was slung over their backs and piled upon their humps. The camels would walk with us, ridden or led by their cameleers, unless the terrain was too difficult or steep, where they would take an easier route and meet us at our camp spot for the night.

With a cry of “*Hareeeee!*” from Khalid, the camels jerked into action, flexing their necks and baring their tombstone teeth, spindly front legs pushing them up to standing in a series of angular jolts. It was a sight to behold as they moved slowly away up the canyon, tall and agile, ambling with grace across the rocky ground despite their heavy load, creating an iconic silhouette that has remained unchanged for centuries. We fell into line behind; Musallem leading the way accompanied by his trainee guide, Swalem. The five of us brought up the rear, trying not to think about how much fun this would be on a motorcycle, but instead taking our lead from the camels by simply putting one foot in front of the other. At last, we were on the move.

We set off striding with purpose, but Musallem was quick to teach us the important business of *shway-shway*, an Arabic expression that loosely translates as little by little, used as the equivalent of take it easy or no hurry. We had many days and



many miles ahead, not to mention mountains to climb and canyons to scramble; both the body and the mind would need to adapt to this new pace.

We soon left the easy trudge of the horizontal behind, turning sharply up a steep mountainside, edging our way along a narrow, rock-strewn track before reaching the saddle, breathless but exhilarated to be rewarded with a grand vista of wide-open country. This cinematic reveal was of such majestic proportions, it should have been accompanied by Morricone-style sweeping strings and soaring soprano vocals. We didn't get the soundtrack, but we did get a real-life geography lesson stretching away as far as the eye could see: an imposing landscape of dry riverbeds, peaks and plains, layers of red, brown, and gold beneath a pale-blue sky. The 360-degree views were a welcome contrast for the eye after the detailed close-up nature of walking the rocky trail where our sights were set squarely on the ground, careful not to put a foot wrong.

Down from the mountain, a hike across a seemingly endless plane of loose shale made for a moonwalk sensation. The only evidence of human existence appeared in the form of a small cave with a broken wooden door where Musallem invited us to kneel down and inspect the contents: a few rusty hand tools and an ancient WWII-era jerry can that would have raised a decent amount on eBay. "There are many places like these across Sinai," he explained. "During the war with

All in a day's walk—from striding across wide open plains to squeezing through canyons. **Clockwise from top left:** The uncomplaining beast of burden, carrying our firewood, water, and food. Peace on Earth and goodwill to all men. Christmas dinner, Bedouin style. Musallem shares his wisdom and tales of the desert with Lois. Traditional weavings, cushions, and blankets decorate the Bedouin camps dotted throughout Sinai. Local art appears in the most unlikely corners of the desert. Austin jumps for joy (at the edge of a very high mountain pass).



Israel, people would make them to hide their possessions.”

We eventually joined a more obvious trail, where vehicle and camel tracks mingled in the sand. The route was lined with tangles of rusty barbed wire, also left over from the war, reminding us in the space and silence that the Sinai had not always been such a peaceful place.

Beneath a lone date palm in a red rock valley, we stopped for Musallem and his crew to have a smoke, and for him to warn us of less tangible dangers of the Sinai. He motioned at the palm fronds casting a shadow where we sat. “This valley is haunted because of this tree. Many years ago, three brothers came here. They slept beneath the tree and when they awoke one of them told his dream. He had been warned in his dream to eat only a few dates from the tree because they are for everyone to share. But his brother called him crazy, and he climbed the tree and cut off all the dates. But then, he fell from the tree, and he died. Now his ghost haunts the valley and nobody will take the dates from this tree again.”

We nodded sagely, none of us believers in ghosts, but the story made a salient point: resources are scarce in the Sinai and to be shared equally.

This pattern of our days and nights fell into a reassuring routine. The sun was our alarm clock. Up at dawn, a breakfast of flatbread freshly baked in the sand served with jam and white cheese. And always a pot of tea shoved into the

embers of the fire. Then while the camels were loaded for the day, we would set out to walk. At the beginning, there was an unspoken concern from all of us that as motorcyclists, attracted to the thrills (and, yes, occasional spills) of two-wheeled, petrol-powered adventures, that we would find walking for hours each day, well, boring. But our fears were unfounded. Our mind-set adjusted easily, and we came to appreciate this new pace and the opportunity to examine our surroundings at a micro level. To watch a faraway landmark move closer in real time over many hours, or even days, or to study the delicate tracks left by a beetle in the sand became an almost meditative pleasure. Any potential drudgery was punctuated by a sudden climb up a canyon, or a scramble up a gully, setting the heart racing. Human interest came by way of halts at remote Bedouin villages. These ramshackle oases appeared as a jumble of tents, breezeblock shacks, and rusty trucks, populated by multi-generational families and their collection of goats and dogs. Trays of tea inevitably appeared, giving Musallem the opportunity to work his PR magic on his neighboring tribes, while the rest of us aired our weary feet.

Each day by late afternoon, following lunch and a much-

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The beautiful simplicity
of putting one foot in
front of the other.





appreciated siesta, we would arrive at a camp spot, selected from Musallem's mental database of stunning places to sleep. As is the human need to shelter around or next to something, the locations were often in the lee of a cave or escarpment, or tucked away in a canyon, bestowing our campsite with an unexpected coziness. Camels were unloaded, rugs and blankets

We had not brought tents, preferring to sleep under the stars, and although the nights were cool, our reward was to awake to a celestial dawn each morning.

sometimes requiring us to sleep fully clothed, our reward was to awake to a celestial dawn each morning, rather than a sheet of colored nylon.

Christmas Day came and went, celebrated with a few miniature bottles of whiskey we'd somehow managed to sneak into our luggage. By now our mental clocks and calendars had become fluid; we were happily losing track. In one sense, each day was the same, but in another, they varied enormously as the infinitesimal detail of the landscape changed around us as we walked, giving each day its own flavor, color, and texture. We noticed everything, all senses alert to our surroundings. We had found our rhythm; we were in the groove—it was al-

kets laid on the ground, the fire lit, the tea made, vegetables chopped, and by the time night fell, we were shimmying into our sleeping bags, pleasantly tired and sated. We had not brought tents, preferring to sleep under the stars, and although the nights were cool,

most a mechanical movement now. It seems the human body likes to walk.

Our journey ended with a long straight trek down a wide riverbed, the camels strung together in a caravan, leading us back to the sea and the beach camp of Ras Abu Galum. Here we jumped aboard a motorboat and were soon powering back to real life. The roar and surge of the outboard in the water was a thrill, but the change of pace was a shock to the system. Dahab, a few miles down the coast, loomed like Las Vegas with its restaurants, hotels, hustlers and hawkers, and hordes of pink-skinned Germans and Russians escaping their winter gloom.

The next morning, we awoke walled into the unsettling comfort of a hotel room, a plastered ceiling for the sky, a 60-watt lightbulb for the sun (although we all agreed that the shower was welcome). Upon waking, I was struck by the realization and then, the unexpected disappointment: I didn't have to walk anywhere today.

I was surprised to find I was going to miss the slow, meditative movement, but it was good to know that it is possible to be both a hiker *and* a biker. ☸

A timeless scene. The camel train arrives at our camp spot for the night.